Thirty-four Years in the Life of Charles Dana Gibson

How Boy Who Sold a Picture Bought a Magazine

By Quinn L. Martin

ONE gray afternoon thirty-four years ago an eighteen-year-old lad, perspiring and weary, climbed several flights of stairs to the editorial rooms of "Life" and placed a drawing on the desk of the editor.

The next day he returned, was told the drawing would be "all right," and received $4 in cash. It was his first sale. He beamed. And he hurried back to his home in Flushing and "dug up" twelve more.

The following day he was back in the "Life" office. The editor looked at his offerings and shook his head. The boy faltered, gathered up his pictures, smiled weakly and took his cap and walked away. On the street below he hesitated, looked back at the building over his shoulder and made a vow.

On April 1 "Life," the most widely circulated humorous weekly publication in America, becomes the property of that boy, now a man, Charles Dana Gibson, the premier portrayer of American feminine beauty in the world.

"Life" will refuse no more of his drawings, because he made good his vow. He kept everlastingly at it, through sunshine and through rain, never looking backward, never accepting himself as one who had "arrived," and he proved beyond the chance of a doubt that the old wag about "where there's a will, there's a way," may be old-fashioned, but is brimful of truth. His achievement stands out as a beacon to doubters.

An Artist at Eight

Charles Dana Gibson was an artist when eight years old. It was at that age that he was found one day lying flat on his stomach in his little home in Flushing, L. I., cutting silhouettes from white paper with scissors. His father, Charles De Wolf Gibson, found him. The neighbors became interested. And through his early childhood days he grew more and more attached to art and to drawing. At eighteen he had entered the New York Art Students' League, and labored days and days before he had completed anything worth showing to even his closest friends.

It was about this time that he finally gained courage to attempt to draw something for publication.

"The Mikado," in which the young artist was deeply interested, was playing in New York. He saw it from a balcony seat. It impressed him. And as he sat there watching one part of it, a most serious and engrossing scene depicting a silver moon with members of the cast singing up to it from the depths of their hearts, he almost giggled aloud as the thought came to him that on to-morrow he would draw a picture showing what he thought really should be used as scenery in the singing of that enchanting song, "The Moon and I."

A few days passed, and without telling anybody in his household about his mission he struck out for New York and raced up the many flights of stairs aforementioned. In his hand, with thumbmarks on its edges, was "The Moon and I." It was, if you please, a drawing of a little black dog sitting beside his kennel at midnight, or thereabouts, his ragged nose pointed directly toward the silvery moon that rose just above the horizon, baying as it appeared and singing as it bayed if one's imagination is to be relied upon to any extent, "The Moon and I." That was his start! John A. Mitchell, late managing editor of "Life," saw in it a wholesome laugh—especially for those devotees of the stage who had seen "The Mikado." He smiled and called the young artist "Mr. Gibson," and said he should like very much to see more of his work.

Rejected the Twelve

Well, he got his wish, because "Mr. Gibson" was on hand shortly after luncheon time next day with the twelve drawings that he had had hidden away somewhere in a clothes closet at home. No doubt he had heard that great artists and authors are able to dispose of their rubbish

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ONE of the first, if not the first, of the famous "Gibson Girls"

"THE MOON AND I."

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ABOVE—"The Moon and I," the first drawing Mr. Gibson ever sold. Below—Mrs. Charles Dana Gibson, called by her husband the most beautiful woman in the world

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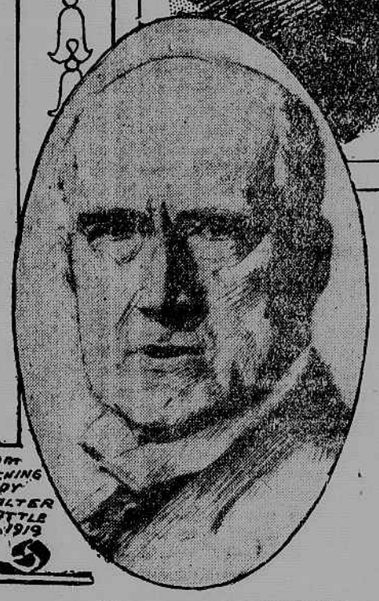
A "GIBSON GIRL" of the present day, from a recent issue of "Life"

CHARLES DANA GIBSON in the late '90s, when his drawings had begun to bring him fame



FROM ETCHING BY WALTER TITTLE 1919

CHARLES DANA GIBSON as he is to-day, in an etching by Walter Tittle

once they become recognized. Anyway, he was there next day with the armful of "masterpieces." Also, he walked away with them shortly afterward, with the words of Mr. Mitchell ringing in his ears:

"Not so good as your first, my lad; not so good as your first. I'm afraid we can't use them."

Now that was a dark moment in the life of Charles Dana Gibson. But it was not without its ray of hope.

"If I owned a publication like that they couldn't turn down my pictures," he thought. "And I'm going to own one." It was at this time that he was turning on his heel, looking backward over his shoulder at the editorial rooms high above Broadway, and it was at this time that he made his vow.

A Boyhood Ambition

"I'm going to own one," he said to himself, "and it shall be earned by my drawing pictures so good that they'll have to use them."

And so it was that he drew pictures "they had to use," until finally the editor of "Life" called him in one day and told him "Life" would like to have a drawing a week throughout the year, and at a rate of pay that looked particularly enticing to him. On the income from those pictures largely he has been enabled to purchase the paper itself, and, may it be added, to stow away a fortune besides.

You should hear him tell of one of the chief reasons why he never lost faith—why, in times when things looked black and prospects were not so fair as they might have been, he could look forward into a better day—always looking ahead, forever seeing into the future far enough to forget his troubles for the moment and realize that with patience and hard work there were reward and hope.

Encouraging Words

If you were to ask him he would tell you that words spoken by one's elders give most help to the young man or woman starting out in the world. He would say that the very actions of John A. Mitchell, the art editor of "Life," when the boy artist heard the words that for the moment spelled failure, caused him to resolve that trifling failure for the moment does not necessarily mean permanent defeat. The fatherly way in which that splendid gentleman handed back to eighteen-year-old Charles Dana Gibson his pictures that "were not so good as your first, my lad," filled him with confidence and purpose to go home and do better. There was no cross dismissal nor gruff intolerance. There was, on the contrary, the exact opposite. There was the smile of faith and the tone of voice that meant more than money or the acceptance of his little drawings to the young artist.

Mr. Gibson would tell you that the masterly fashion in which Mr. Mitchell disposed of him and sent him home to "dig, dig, dig" was to him much the same as the sunshine is to a fading rose.

Helps the Ambitious

And as he has learned, so does he practice. No aspiring young man who showed the slightest sparkle of ability as an artist ever received a rebuff or a word of discouragement from him. In his work for "Life," as a matter of fact, he has put his very best work into each and every picture he ever drew for that publication, believing that therein he might add hope to the ambition of young men everywhere who sought to rise in his field. It is so with Mr. Gibson the owner. He holds now and shall continue to hold the very deepest desire to be of benefit to others as well as to himself.

Mr. Gibson does not know when he struck the zenith of his popularity or ability as an artist, if such a thing he ever has struck. Everybody knows that the "Gibson girls" are known from San Francisco to Penobscot Bay, his summer home, and from Texas to North Dakota, and on the ocean and on the other side and everywhere that art has penetrated. But if you should say to the strapping, big, good natured man who sits in a drapery hung studio on a top floor of Carnegie Hall:

Never His Best

"Mr. Gibson, when did you 'hit your stride'?" he would reply: "Well, now, I just don't know—don't know if I've ever done that. Don't know that any man ever reaches just the place that he would like to believe to be his very level best."

This man, whose portrayal of pretty girls has made him the idol of art lovers everywhere, has a strange philosophy concerning the achievement of success. A fellow just simply trundles along, doing his best all the while, and after awhile he finds he is doing nicely, later he feels he's doing better, and after awhile he seems to be just flying along at breakneck speed when of a sudden something comes along, he feels a little "unfit" and he gets a terrible setback.

And what does he do then?

If you asked Mr. Gibson he would cover his own case by saying that he walks home through Central Park, gets some fresh air, and if his case is too perplexing he takes a run up to his summer home at Penobscot Bay and works around the house a while until he feels fit again.

Never Say Die

But he believes that no man ever reaches what he actually believes to be his highest point of efficiency. And he believes this is as it should be. He believes the minute a man throws down his work and quits he is doomed. Salvation lies alone in never showing the while feather.

Mr. Gibson just trundled along drawing pretty girls, and then he drew others, and after a while he drew more. It was not so unusual, he thought. But those who were watching his work thought differently. They called his pretty faces the "Gibson Girls." He received hundreds of letters, following the picturization of one very striking young miss back in 1893, saying all manner of things about his ability. He set to thinking maybe he really ought to specialize a bit. And he did. Girls, girls, girls. He drew them in their Sunday dresses and in their walking suits. He drew them on horseback and at the theater. "Gibson Girls" were copied from his work throughout the United States and Europe.

Live Gibson Girls

And, lo! Real, live, walking and talking "Gibson Girls" came into existence. You saw them on the sidewalks, in the theaters, at the clubs and in the parks. Hair done the same as his latest panels showed them. Nose tilted at just the proper "Gibson" angle. Throats bared after his latest poses. And then came frocks and gowns of all sorts and face powders and vanishing creams and what not. There were "Gibson Girls" and "Gibson Girl" "trimmings" on the East Side, on the West Side, and all around the town. There were "Gibson Girls" before the lions in Trafalgar Square and "Gibson Girls" in faraway Seattle. They were everywhere!

And while Broadway talked of the "splendid types" and the masterly style of that Mr. Gibson who draws for "Life," this artist was doing just what he will be doing to-morrow—sitting before his picture, working out more details, improving, ever improving, and not satisfied to sit down and say:

"Well, I've arrived!" It wasn't in him. That's why he owns "Life."

It was only a short time after he had achieved wide fame as the man who set the minds of the fashionable colonies of the world awhirl with "Gibson Girls" that he was married. It has been said that he was the most proposed to man in the world just before he married Miss Irene Langhorne, of Richmond. And then when those who sought to win him saw his bride they fell back, slowly and uniformly, admitting that they really stood no chance and that they would retreat in the same manner in which they advanced.

The Real Gibson Girl

Mrs. Gibson was the true "Gibson Girl." There was instant buzz. Was she the inspiration for all these glorious girlies? Had he only "found himself" when he met her? Many persons declared that was the case and many newspapers came out openly declaring that at last the secret was out. The original "Gibson Girl" was none other than his fiancée!

Further than to admit very frankly that she influenced his work a great deal and to explain that he had been drawing American young women long before he was married, Mr. Gibson never has been known to commit himself.

And considering all this turmoil that arose—and it really was turmoil, or something very closely akin—you wonder just for the curiosity of the thing how much money Mr. Gibson has earned through the drawing of these striking young ladies. That is another secret. But one has only to draw upon his imagination to decide for himself that the artist has no cause for worry.

A Big Contract

He wouldn't mind telling you that the management of "Collier's Magazine," just prior to his trip abroad to Spain and France (yes, he had a go at Europe, too, but only to study a while and view the scenery and return), signed a contract with him agreeing to pay him $100,000 for a few pictures from time to time.

A pretty far cry from $4 a picture to thousands upon thousands for another. But it harks back to the foundation upon which his house of success is built. There has never been one day in his life that he has not been busy. Busy at work or busy at play. He considers one just as necessary as the other. No, he doesn't play golf. He works around the house up North. And he walks quite a lot. He's rather ashamed he doesn't play golf, and thinks he may learn one of these days.

It goes without saying, seeing that he now is at the head of the great humorous weekly which he has just bought, that Mr. Gibson has that one essential to success—a sense of humor. Indeed he has. If you want best proof of that ask any of the editors in the "Life" offices.

His Joke on Masson

Mr. Thomas Masson, managing editor, for example, who for more than thirty years has been associated with the artist, remembers once upon a time when Mr. Gibson came rushing into the editorial rooms of the publication one day several hours late with a drawing for a joke which Mr. Masson had written. As a matter of fact, it developed later that Mr. Gibson's drawing had been finished and on his desk for some time, but as he came rushing into the editor's office he exclaimed:

"I swear, sir, I am sorry about the delay in this drawing. I've worked hard on it. Put in more time on it than I have devoted to a drawing for many months."

"But," returned the editor, "why is this? I don't understand."

"Well, it's simply that I like Tom Masson so well, and I can't see a thing in the world that's funny about this joke and I've been trying to make the drawing funny enough to do for both of us."

Mr. Gibson's sense of humor "sticks out," as they say in the art department, in every piece of light work he completes. And as he is at his work so is he in personal life. He is always ready with a quick pun or a "snappy" joke and, after all, hasn't it been rather a decided advantage to him?

A Fling at Critics

He "had his fling" at all of the art editors in existence not so long ago while speaking before an artists' association that held a dinner the guests of which consisted largely of those gentlemen whose shakes of the head indicate the poor artist's work is not at all acceptable. Mr. Gibson was one of the speakers. Among other things he said:

"There was a time when they drubbed us and grubbed us and made all manner of fun of us, and very few of them [the editors] ever would condescend to lend us a dollar when we were 'broke.' But now they're eating right out of our hands. We are even paying for the very food they're eating to-night, and before long we are going to arrange to build a home for all the old art editors who couldn't be bothered with us when we were climbing up the stairs trying to sell our work."

His remarks, striking a spot very near to the hearts of every artist present, were received with thunderous applause, whereupon Mr. Gibson explained to his guests that it was all in fun and that as a matter of fact he thought art editors were pretty fine men taken as a whole. He may have been peering into the future again. Who knows?

Their Many Charities

And then there is the serious side to the man. There never was a kindlier friend in time of trouble. You will do well when visiting in his home if you pass an evening without his calling or being called on the telephone to inquire into or be told about the progress of some poor girl or boy whose case he is watching. And Mrs. Gibson is his close second in this regard. A little Polish girl down the street needs her attention and she must rush away to help her. A crippled boy needs food and clothing. She asks her son to accompany her and together they go over to the poor quarter and administer to their needs.

And now, what about the man himself? What sort of man is it that has risen from $4 a picture to thousands of dollars a picture, and from tired climber of staircases to owner of the very plant that once could not use his efforts?

You can see him yourself if you will close your eyes and imagine yourself entering a wide, high room walled in with great, faded hanging tapestries, with a broad skylight at one side, dusty in spots, and with a wicker chair here, holding several books, a stool there, another armchair at another side and near the center of the room and beneath the skylight an easel supporting a piece of white cardboard 2x3 feet wide. Step into the room, go nearer to the easel, walk past it and there, sitting before it, pen in hand, big, fine, open face aglow with the pink of health, you will see a man who just naturally "looks like somebody."

Mr. Gibson uses a plain wicker side arm-chair, in which he sits while drawing those stunning brunettes. No gilt tassels hanging from its arms, either. Just plain. Severely plain. But the man! Not so plain. A mountainous fellow. Large head with white hair, closely cropped. His forehead is wide and his features strong and impressive like a statue of bronze. His eyes fill with little rays of sparkling light, and he invites you to be seated. He is smooth faced, and as you look into his eyes you think this man has the biggest, broadest, fullest face you ever have seen. And when he smiles his whole face wrinkles and his eyes grow narrow and almost close, and you feel he is laughing out of his heart.

No Bohemian Traits

His collar is of that old time pattern that would be known as a "stand up." It opens widely at the throat to make way for a huge neck. And there is a modest black or gray tie beneath it. His clothing is modest. No colors. If he should get up and put on his hat and overcoat and prepare to go to the street, you might think you had made a mistake and called upon a minister or a bank president instead of the great artist. He is as free from red ties and five karat diamond rings as the one-time small town artist was encumbered with them. He is a conservative gentleman! More than that, all that can be said about his personal appearance is that he is large—very large—very, very large!

But you have entered the room, we shall say, on the day after it has been announced that he has purchased "Life." He knows, and really doesn't have to tell you, that it is the biggest step of his life. You know it before you go to see him.

And then comes your ordeal. Modest, he will not talk about his own success. Fearless, he will not show that he is thinking of the great undertaking he has shouldered. Industrious, it is only too clear that he wants to continue scratching on that half-finished picture with his fine little pen. Courteous, you know he is not going to tell you to leave. And there you are. Look at him. If he is afraid of his adventure it does not show in the dead steadiness of his hand. If he doubts his ability to win it does not show in a single tremor of the clear gray eye. If he thinks that he has "arrived" at last and that his working days are past, there's not a solitary sign of evidence as he works away at that picture. Nor will there ever be.

Charles Dana Gibson has just begun to work.